

Westie Heaven

JOANN AND ROBERT D. HUTH,
BRYN MAWR, PENNSYLVANIA



One of the pocket watch holders from Robert Huth's collection

“It’s the detail that I love,” says Robert Huth. He is holding a small Japanese Satsuma vase that is exquisitely decorated with intricate, geometric gold patterns, interspersed with naturalistic plants and flowers. “We don’t necessarily go for larger works of art, but we are drawn to smaller, finer pieces,” he explains as he gently holds a nineteenth-century netsuke depicting a sleeping dog, with a beautifully carved collar. “I suppose that it’s one of the things that drew us to Christine Merrill’s work – that same sense of detail and craftsmanship. JoAnn and I never tire of looking at Christine’s painting of Darla and Spanky.” JoAnn agrees, playfully adjusting the rheostat that controls the light over the portrait. As she lowers the light on the painting, different aspects of the composition are highlighted. The painting takes on a rich, intense quality, and as the background falls away, the faces of the dogs seem to emerge from the painting.

Robert and JoAnn Huth live in a large and rambling early twentieth-century stone house outside of Philadelphia that they have lovingly restored. There are beautiful things everywhere you look: nineteenth-century academic paintings in the formal living room, vitrines full of antique watch holders and antique carriage clocks, shelves of Austrian Bergman bronze dogs and umbrella stands with antique walking sticks. The prominent place over the mantelpiece, however, is reserved for Christine Merrill’s portrait of Spanky and Darla, portrayed standing on one of the low stone walls in their extensive gardens.

The Huths started collecting canine related works of art on a trip to London, when they discovered Austrian bronzes, by the Bergman Factory. Unlike most nineteenth-century bronzes, which are patinated and then fired, Austrian bronzes are hand-painted after they are cast. A collection of dog-related walking sticks followed and the dog theme eventually traveled to the living room where Christine Merrill’s portrait of Darla and Spanky keeps company with three nineteenth-century dog paintings including a highly detailed head-study by the Austrian artist Carl Reichert. “We were in New York on one of Bob’s business trips,” explains JoAnn, “and we asked the concierge if there was a gallery in New York that might have dog paintings. They recommended the William Secord Gallery, and when we walked in, I knew that I was home. The first piece that I saw was a painting of two Westies by Christine Merrill and I knew that I just had to have it. Then Bob found out that it was by a living artist and the rest is history. We met Christine and commissioned her to do a portrait of our Darla and Spanky.”

Spanky and Darla in the back yard of the Huths’ Bryn Mawr home



The commissioning process was new for the Huths and Christine visited them several times before settling on an appropriate composition for the painting. “It wasn’t just about taking pictures,” explains JoAnn, “she laid on the floor with the dogs and she watched them, and we’d sit and have coffee and she’d snap a picture of them. She really wanted to understand their personalities, and the more comfortable they got, the more she saw of their personalities.”

“Christine was very patient with us,” says JoAnn, “We explained to her that when strangers came into the house – it did not matter who – Spanky would immediately get that frightened look on his face. I wanted the look that we know: the smiling look he has when we come down in the morning. And you know what? Christine did not stop until she got Spanky to smile. And that’s what makes the painting for us. Christine captured that expression exactly.” Looking up at the painting, Bob reiterates: “That’s what we most appreciated about her. That she was willing to capture the essence of our dogs.”

JoAnn Huth greets Darla, Spanky and Coco



Christine Merrill, Spanky and Darla, 2009, Oil on panel, 24 x 36 inches

The Huths are thrilled with the finished painting. “I think that she truly captured the dogs,” says Bob. “It’s just so them,” continues JoAnn, “Darla’s hair is not always so pouffed out like that, but it’s still really Darla. And Spanky! Christine Merrill got his expression and his body perfectly.”

JoAnn came into the marriage with a terrier mix named Casey that she had rescued from a shelter when he was still just a puppy of nine months. Bob, however, did not grow up with dogs and he was initially hesitant about having Casey in the house. “Bob didn’t want the dog at first, but when Casey came to live with us, he fell in love with him. Casey stayed with us for eighteen years, and when he became blind, deaf and couldn’t bark anymore, it was Bob who would take him on walks for fresh air, sometimes carrying him home because he was too weak to make the return trip on his own.” The Huths eventually bought their first Westie, a male named Spanky, and he was the perfect fit for them. Next came Darla, who had the same parents as Spanky.

Bob has become a complete convert to having dogs as pets. “They are really great,” he proclaims, “they run over and greet you when you come to the door,

and they are wonderful to be around.” “On my first trip to New York,” JoAnn tells me, “I called home and was surprised to hear that not only were the dogs on the furniture, but they were even sleeping in the bed with my husband! It doesn’t matter because this is their home. Period!” Like many dog owners, they have become so attached that they feel guilty about going away for long trips. “We will stay home before we kennel them,” states JoAnn. “We have been thinking about a vacation home and one of the biggest factors is the dogs. We are considering South Carolina, because of course we could drive and take the dogs with us. They are our family and we love every second with them.”

JoAnn often fosters other dogs, preparing them for their new adoptive homes. One little dog named Coco, however, did not leave. Initially not getting along with Darla and Spanky, the Huths were worried that she might not settle in. When a visiting fourth dog was introduced to the household, the three became a group. “You know, Spanky and Darla hadn’t really let Coco into their group yet, but when there was another dog who was somewhat aggressive with Coco, they became a pack. You just saw it. They protected their own.” Coco stayed, and although as a rescue dog, she is somewhat food aggressive, she is getting better.

The Huths feel that the West Highland White Terrier is the perfect breed for them. “They love being with you,” says JoAnn, “but they are not clingy. They are not yappy, and they are a big dog in a little body – just right for us.” Looking up at Christine’s painting, JoAnn proclaims that it is “something that we want in this family for lifetimes to come. And the more we look at it the more we like it. I look at it all the time, and when the lighting changes at night, it looks totally different. I love it.”

Robert and JoAnn Huth with Darla, Coco and Spanky



Darla and Spanky consult with Coco

